

A Perspective on the Evolution of Interpretive Research

Sam H. Ham, Professor and Director
Center for International Training and Outreach (CITO)
College of Natural Resources
Department of Resource Recreation and Tourism
University of Idaho, USA

Keynote presentation to:
Taiwan, U.S., and Australia International Symposium on
Environmental Interpretation and Ecotourism

Taichung City, Taiwan, November 4, 2002

ABSTRACT

Research on interpretation, per se, is beginning to show signs of maturation. From its beginnings in the 1960s, interpretive research has struggled to find its niche among other social sciences. Plagued by rhetorical insistence that "interpretation" was different and special as an educational activity, and guided by unquestioned and untested "truisms" and "rules," research on interpretation began on nebulous theoretical footing. In the early years, empirical analyses focused on interpretation were frequently naïve and sometimes based on flawed or inadequate research methodologies. Typically, interpretive research asked questions that could have best been addressed in the context of existing social and psychological theory. But interpretation in those days was thought to be distinct and deserving of its own, unique theoretical focus. Three decades later, interpretive research addresses more sophisticated questions and borrows heavily from social and psychological theory (including the applied social sciences such as marketing, consumer behavior, and education). Concurrent with the increased complexity of the issues they address, interpretive researchers today are becoming more adept at selecting and applying appropriate research methods to their work. These evolutionary trends are evident in the focus of this symposium. Interpretive research is maturing, and it is maturing all across the world.

A Perspective on the Evolution of Interpretive Research

Thank you Dr. Chen. I appreciate your and Dr. Wu's invitation to speak this morning about interpretive research. This is an area of inquiry I've watched with more than casual interest over the past 25 years. And so, it's gratifying to have an opportunity to share my views on it at this symposium. Although I don't need to define "interpretation" for this group, I will be using the term in my remarks today to refer generally to the communication side of natural resource management. As you know, interpretation is usually associated with educational activities and services in leisure settings such as tourist destinations, parks, forests, museums, zoos, aquaria, botanical gardens, science centers and other non-formal learning environments. And the desired outcomes we often associate with it include enhanced recreation experiences, environmental and cultural awareness, appreciation of the managed values of a place, resource protection and conservation, and positive public relations. Seeing it more or less in this way, researchers have been looking at the interpretation process for about a quarter of a century, but for many reasons that I'll discuss, interpretive research has been slow to find its niche in the social sciences.

My purpose this morning is to leave a very global impression with you about the state of interpretive research. To do that, I thought it might be useful first to look backwards and try to examine what I see as the roots and some of the growing pains of this area of inquiry. The impression I want to leave with you is that interpretive research is, indeed, showing signs of coming of age. Although the process has been slow, research on interpretation is beginning to mature.

I chose the title of this presentation carefully. I'm calling it "A Perspective on the Evolution of Interpretive Research," because it's precisely that--one person's perspective on the growth and development of research on the interpretation process. This presentation will not take the form of an oral review of literature, and certainly not a critical analysis of specific studies--in fact, I'll mention only a few names and specific studies. To do these things would require far more than the few minutes we have today. What I want to do instead is to try to offer a sort of global assessment of what I think has been going on with respect to interpretive research over the past quarter century--where it has come from, what hurdles it has cleared and where it seems to be going. To do just this in just 30 minutes presents a real challenge. But I also can't resist the temptation to interject some editorial opinions on where I think it *should* be going, too.

For convenience, I'm going to divide interpretive research into what I see as four evolutionary stages, defined more or less, chronologically. These are (1) the "Formative Years" beginning in the 1960s and extending into the early 70s, (2) the "Search for the Best Medium" stage in the mid-70s and 80s, (3) the "Quest for Legitimacy" stage which took root in the 1980s and has extended well into the current decade, and (4) "Early Maturation," where I think interpretive research has been since about the early 1990s. It would not be fair or accurate to claim that these stages have begun and ended precisely according to my makeshift chronology--in fact, it's almost certain that most of them are still going on. But each did, in my view, predominate at the different times I'll discuss.

Stage One: The Formative Years

One of the perplexing things about interpretation from a research point of view is that we have not always agreed on what "interpretive research" should focus on, even at the most general level. Arguments abound to this day on what interpretation is, and what its functions and desired outcomes ought to be. To a researcher, deciding on theoretical constructs and measurement strategies is problematic when one can't agree on what the phenomenon under investigation even is. Contemporary research into "ecotourism" is, I believe, going through the same definitional infancy. Our "fuzzy" notions of what "interpretation" is characterized interpretation circles especially in the early 1960s, and even to this day. Metaphors from metaphysics and magic were often used to describe interpretation. When we spoke about the outcomes of interpretation, we were likely to invoke notions like "gleams in the visitor's eye, "magical experiences," "enlightenment," "appreciation," "revelation" and "provocation." When we spoke about the inputs of interpretation we conceptualized nameless "techniques," "gimmicks," "gadgets," "tricks," and "approaches." But there was little in these early concepts to suggest theoretical direction, much less dependent and independent variables.

"The Formative Years" as I'm calling them, occurred (I believe in the early 1970s) when a rare duo of researchers working at the University of Washington in the US began to write about interpretation as a legitimate area of inquiry that is necessary in land and resource management. Though each published many important articles separately, they co-authored what I continue to see as the most important journal article published on interpretive research. These researchers were Don Field with the National Park Service's Cooperative Park Studies Unit, and J. Alan Wagar, with the US Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Forest and Range Experiment Station. Their 1973 article in the *Journal of Environmental Education* entitled "Visitor Groups and Interpretation in Parks and Other Outdoor Leisure Settings," provided for the first time what had eluded researchers interested in interpretation--a paradigm. Field and Wagar saw interpretation as agency-initiated communication aimed at visitor groups. Central to their view of interpretation's functions was the idea that it should be rewarding to visitors--that aside from whatever other outcomes management desired from interpretive effort, visitors (a voluntary audience) must perceive value in it before they'd waste their time exposing themselves to it. As simple as this notion will appear today to interpretive researchers, Don's and Alan's article conspicuously impacted the early directions that interpretive research would take for the next many years. Many interpreters today are familiar with the conceptualization of captive and noncaptive audiences that I've unleashed on them. This dichotomy of free and captive audiences occurred to me in 1973 when I first read the Field and Wagar article, and it remains one of the most cited articles in our field. Genesis of interpretive research had occurred. Suddenly research was showing up in the literature focused on dependent variables such as fun, enjoyment, entertainment, and value.

Stage Two: Search for the Best Medium

I think a fair criticism of interpretive research well into the 1980s is that it was naïve. But, retrospectively, all new sciences are naïve in their infancy. The naiveté of interpretive research lied both in our theoretical orientation and methodologies. Some have claimed that interpretive

research in the 1980s lacked a theoretical orientation. This is probably not true. But it's fair to say that whatever theoretical orientation existed was poorly articulated, if it was at all. The reason perhaps was that the single most prevailing idea on our minds in those days was that there must be some best or better communication medium for communicating with recreationists. Influenced by the Canadian media philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, and the classic Shannon-Weaver communication model (featuring the telecommunication nodes of sender, receiver, channel and feedback), interpretive researchers set out to find the "best" interpretive media. Still clinging to Field's and Wagar's notion of reward, a veritable litany of studies was conducted in which affective responses to interpretive media (such as fun, liking, interestingness, enjoyment, preference, etc.) were systematically recorded and compared. The theoretical orientation was insidious, perhaps, but existent. We believed McLuhan's dictum that the "medium was the message," and we thought that the most preferred media were the most effective media because voluntary exposure and self-selection were requisite to any cognitive or behavioral outcomes interpretation might produce. In other words, you had to pay attention in order to get anything out of an interpretive program. But just as communication psychology itself had discovered in the 1950s and 1960s, the results of these studies on interpretive media were mixed, and no clear patterns emerged with respect to visitors' media preferences. Everybody seemed to prefer different interpretive media, and every interpretive medium was "best" for somebody.

Later, with the advent of research on the psychological benefits and outcomes of recreation experiences, we began to realize that interpretation was not an experience in itself that could be examined and evaluated in isolation. Interpretive "experiences" for recreationists were part and parcel of something larger--a *leisure* experience of some kind. As recreation psychology and sociology matured, so did interpretive research. Perhaps the clearest and most important theoretical accomplishment, which dates back more or less to the mid-1980s, was the empirical realization that there are many types of visitors who may desire very different types of recreation experiences. As interpretation came to be seen as just one intellectual dimension of a recreation experience (rather than the experience in and of itself), we began to posit that visitors *self-select* for interpretation just as they self-select for recreation. People predictably sort themselves out in time and space across a spectrum of interpretive opportunities just as they do in selecting recreation opportunities. Some people like to tent camp, some like to backpack, others like cruise ships, some like going to visitor centers. Likewise, some like to read interpretive panels, some like to attend evening campfire programs, some like to take short guided hikes, some like to go on commercially-guided tours, some like to listen to audio tapes, some like to read exhibits, and today, many like to surf the web, and on and on.

Thanks to this research, the old interpretive planning model based on our naïve search for the "best medium" was being replaced by a different model based upon the idea that if providers offer a spectrum of interpretive media and make it available to our audiences both in time and space, then those audiences will self-select to what suits them most based on how they think those interpretive opportunities fits into the kind of recreation experience they're after. Today, this recognition is reflected in marketing and advertising strategies by tour operators in search of a competitive advantage. Some research in US national parks during this time period even suggested a certain amount of specialization among park-goers with respect to their interpretive tastes (campfire program specialists versus guided walk specialists, versus wayside exhibit specialists, etc.). Although this line of research hasn't developed much since then, the paradigm

of audience self-selection is being widely applied. My research the past 5 years, for example, has focused mainly on the use of interpretation to reach strategic audiences with strategic messages that are aimed at strategic outcomes. Whereas in the 1960s and 70s, the same research would have started with the media and then concerned itself with messages, today our reasoning starts with the audience, then proceeds to the desired outcomes of interpretation and then to theory-based messages that need to be communicated to those audiences in order to achieve those outcomes, and then finally, to the media that can be used to reach the audiences with those messages. We are applying the paradigm to a range of desired outcomes, from saving black bears in Yosemite National Park in the US, to generating funds for conservation in the Galapagos Islands, to enhancing tourists' experiences in parks, museums and on cruise ships. Marketing studies and plans throughout the tourism industry are based on identical reasoning. A very exciting new development in Tasmania, Australia is the publishing of a new statewide tourism marketing strategy called "The Tasmanian Experience Strategy." This strategy is the first in the world to place interpretation at the center of tourism marketing and product delivery. It makes interpretation a central defining element of the kind of experiences Tourism Tasmania is going to develop and market to the rest of the world. This new and enlightened way of thinking would never have occurred to Tourism Tasmania officials if the old "best medium" paradigm were still in place.

Our search for the best medium in the 1970s failed, but its failure led to the new paradigm that all media are important because audiences self-select. This is *not* an irony. This is the nature of scientific inquiry.

A parallel direction in the "Search for the Best Medium Stage" were a number of studies in the 1970s and 80s that focused on attendance at interpretive activities. Beyond the need to justify interpretation by showing its popularity, attendance studies reflected a resurgence of the Field and Wagar paradigm by reasoning that interpretation's contribution to management objectives was possible only to the extent that non-captive audiences would voluntarily partake of messages aimed at them. Again, however, results on how to attract audiences to interpretive activities produced few consistent results. On the whole, the most appealing conclusion to be drawn from this research is that interpretive activity-going is, for some people and social groups, a regularity--something they consistently do when they visit parks or tourist settings. Indeed, a quantitative model involving more than a dozen variables used in one study revealed that the single best predictor of interpretive activity attendance was past attendance. That is, some people specialize in attending personal interpretive services, while others do not. Like the "best medium" studies, research on attendance at interpretive activities corroborated the idea that visitors self-select.

Stage Three: Quest for Legitimacy

If you hang around interpreters as much as I have the past 25 years, you hear a lot of the same concerns over and over. One of these, perhaps the most common concern of all, is that interpretation isn't always taken seriously by management, particularly in public agencies. It's *often* true, at least in most of the 30 or so countries I've worked in. Interpretation is sometimes the first budget casualty in times of austerity. Interpreters may not be invited to the table when

important management decisions are made or critical issues are discussed. And interpreters and guides are generally not paid at levels commensurate with their peers who work in other specialization areas. Why?

Well, I guess one possible answer is that interpretation is not always seen as being as important to an organization's mission as interpreters, themselves, see it. In this sense, interpretation still hasn't completed its quest for legitimacy. Part of this reality stems from many decades of rhetorical insistence on the part of interpreters that we were somehow different and unique, not just within the organizational scheme of things, but different *qualitatively* in terms of whom interpreters *were* and what interpreters *did*. Fed by almost religious fervor in some particularly radical circles, interpreters painted themselves within their own organizations as a counterculture, rather than as part of the mainstream concern and mission of the organization.

This has come back to haunt interpreters over and over again. Most notably, I think, it is reflected in the lack of widespread respect for the good that well-conceived and artfully programmed interpretive activities might do in advancing land management and natural resource conservation. Recognition of the need for interpretation to achieve legitimacy originated in a prominent way in the early 1980s. Although Wagar and others had issued earlier statements about the importance of demonstrating interpretation's contribution to management, it was at this time that a clear focus on systematic evaluation of interpretive research emerged, and calls for interpretation to "show" its accountability were originating, oddly enough, from interpreters themselves. Concurrent with this new interest in evaluation came a distinct focus on interpretation, not just as an enjoyable tool for enlightening visitors about the values of special places, but rather as a tool of resource management. Emphasis on the use of interpretation as a management tool has continued to this day, and serious theoretically-based efforts to evaluate communication treatments of physical management problems are beginning to show up in refereed journals. Notwithstanding these few exceptions, however, the quest for legitimacy of interpretation's role in contemporary land management continues.

Stage Four: Early Maturation

"Early maturation" is the most subjective phrase I'll use today. But this is what I think is going on right now in interpretive research,--and has been going on much of the past 10 years or so. Certainly, what I believe characterizes contemporary interpretive research was foreshadowed as long ago as the 70s and 80s--especially with some of the research done by Field, Wagar, Machlis, Ham, Roggenbuck, Hammitt, Mullins, Cherem, and Traweek in the US and Canada. Building on these modest theoretical and methodological beginnings, we have seen, especially in the past decade, a number of encouraging trends in interpretive research. Here are a few of them that I see:

Perhaps the most conspicuous trend is that interpretive research is internationalizing. Those who know this literature probably noticed in my earlier remarks that most of my references were to research conducted in the US, and in certain instances, in Canada. That was by necessity because in the early years that's where the vast majority of interpretive research was being conducted. But not so today. The papers submitted to the interpretation and communication

theme area of the 1999 International Symposium on Society and Resource Management (ISSRM) emanated from at least eight countries on five continents. Indeed, in just the past 10-15 years I've personally been asked to do research and training focusing on communication and the environment in about 25 countries. Interpretation, and with it, interpretive research have internationalized. And it's fitting that I find myself making these remarks here in Asia because it is precisely here where I believe major advances in interpretive research are going to be made. As this group will surely know, you have one of the best bright young minds in Dr. Homer Wu of the Graduate Institute of Environmental Education at the National Taichung Teachers College. Dr. Wu's research is fresh, theoretically rich and methodologically sound. He is exploring issues that matter, including ways to motivate the important volunteer workforce in interpretation here in Taiwan. Joined by colleagues, Dr. Chen and Dr. Wang, Dr. Wu and his graduate students are helping to lead the way for a new generation of interpretive research both in Asia and elsewhere in the world.

Likewise, a number of colleagues in Australia are actively involved in interpretive research because of its central role in nature-based tourism there. I am pleased to be an Adjunct Professor at Monash University in Australia where my colleague, Dr. Betty Weiler, and I are building a research program focused on guiding and interpretation and on strategic interpretive planning. We hope this work will help to advance the politically and emotionally charged issue of what constitutes "best practice" in interpretation, and how theoretically-based standards for training and evaluating guides might be developed and implemented. Looking back over the past twenty years, it seems to me that the rest of the world is now joining North America in advancing interpretive research. And there is momentum in other countries such as Scotland, England, and in some Central American countries. In many countries where I've worked, interpretive research has enjoyed a faster road to legitimacy than we experienced in the US and Canada.

But even as rosy as I've made things sound, many obstacles to the continued maturation of interpretive research remain worldwide. First among them is funding. I don't need to tell this audience about the difficulty of funding research. Many of you live with this reality everyday. But funding for interpretive research is particularly challenging. In most countries, federal support for research on interpretation is nonexistent. Indeed, in the US, only the National Park Service supports interpretive research as a matter of agency interest, and this research is only conducted on National Park Service interpretive programs. The other major federal land management agencies (including the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and US Fish and Wildlife Service) only rarely support research to guide their interpretive programs. And yet, the single most common phone calls I receive are from my colleagues in these agencies wanting to know if I know of any research that's been done that could help them in such and such situation. Something is *wrong* if policy and decision-making processes are calling for research and nothing is being done to pay for it.

The result has been that many social scientists in the 1980s who were focused intellectually on interpretation gradually fled to other areas of inquiry where funding was more abundant, and publication outlets were more numerous. You can't blame them since the very real issues of tenure, promotion and achievement of professional respect hinge on research contracts, graduate students, and refereed publications. As a result, too few social scientists today are focused on interpretation and communication as a scholarly activity. For an old guy like me, it's easy to see

that efforts must be made to make interpretive research more attractive for researchers, particularly young scholars. That's why I am so enthused by Dr. Wu's research program and the work he and his colleagues and graduate students are doing.

Another positive development is occurring in Australia where, as I mentioned earlier, the private tourism sector has recognized that strong interpretive programs make good business sense. Much of the research I am involved with there comes at the request of private companies or government tourism bodies interested in strengthening private tourism businesses. Often the research leads to training and human capacity building programs as a practical complement to the research. Tourism Tasmania's Experience Strategy that I mentioned a few minutes ago, is designed around the premise that good interpretive research must inform both marketing strategies and statewide human resources development programs. Things are getting to be quite exciting on little island, especially if you are an interpretive researcher like I am!

But the maturation process continues nevertheless. A second sign that research on interpretation is maturing is the more sophisticated theoretical grounding and methodologies found in published studies. Ironically, interpreters may have succeeded in the 1960s and 70s in convincing others just how different they were. Interpretive research has for many years struggled to find its niche among other social sciences, in part, because we made it seem so unique and special that it almost defied systematic inquiry. Plagued by our own rhetorical insistence that interpretation was somehow so different and special, and guided (especially in the beginning) by unquestioned and untested "truisms" and so-called "rules," research on interpretation began on nebulous theoretical footing that we are only now beginning to recover from. This has made the road to legitimacy particularly bumpy, despite the fact that virtually no one argues that the keys to achieving sustainable development will lie ultimately in the human psyche--at the heart and soul of interpretation's intellectual turf.

But this is changing. In the early years, empirical analyses focused on interpretation were frequently shallow or naïve, and sometimes were based on flawed or inadequate research methodologies. Typically, interpretive research asked questions that could have been best addressed in the context of existing social and psychological theory. But since interpretation in those days was thought to be distinct and deserving of its own theoretical focus, only a few researchers looked seriously for guidance in the rich theory offered in the basic disciplines.

Today, interpretive research addresses more sophisticated questions than it used to. Asking which is better, a slide show or a brochure seemed an important question in the 1970s. Today we wonder which hierarchical message structure produces better long-term memory and comprehension of message content, and which cues lead to attention paying in oral presentations and information processing of exhibit content.

Likewise, interpretive research today borrows more heavily from social and psychological theory. Recent published articles have explored interpretation through the theory of reasoned action and theory of planned behavior, norm focus theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, schema theory, protection motivation theory, and a wide range of other cognition and social cognition theoretical frameworks. If I were talking about any other applied social science, citing lists of theoretical orientations would seem unnecessary or even comical. But the fact that

interpretive researchers are now dipping into them with regularity is a new enough phenomenon to be noteworthy. We are decidedly an applied science, and so recent connections of interpretation to the applied social sciences such as marketing, consumer behavior, applied behavioral analysis, importance-performance analysis, and education are also, in my opinion, signs that research on interpretation--not as ideology, but as a *communication process*--is indeed maturing and developing into a legitimate applied social science in its own right.

An encouraging trend in interpretive research is that interpreters themselves are beginning to embrace inquiry into themselves and their work. They've been slow to do this for many reasons, and their resistance has held back interpretive research in some sectors. Many interpreters have clung tenaciously to Freeman Tilden's assertion that they should remain "happy amateurs," content to love their life's work and to never take themselves too seriously. Such a self-view does not produce an insistence on scientific inquiry. The advent of volunteerism in interpretation was a natural, and in some ways, beautiful response to the austerity that rocked interpretation in the US in the 1980s. But from a research point of view, if anyone can be an interpreter just because s/he is willing to donate time to it, then the process itself must not be difficult or important enough to warrant research attention. Today, we certainly forgive Freeman for not foreseeing that 50 years after publishing *Interpreting Our Heritage*, there would be a worldwide profession of interpreters and university curricula, indeed masters and Ph.D. programs dedicated to advancing and creating knowledge about interpretation. Two recent developments, one in Australia and one in the US, are indicative of the kinds of changes going on in the interpretive profession. In Australia, the national ecotour guide certification program, sponsored by the Office of National Tourism, and a different but parallel process in the US--the National Association for Interpretation's national certification program--are evidence that interpreters are embracing new standards of excellence that will fuel research in the coming years. Here in Taiwan, Dr. Wu's research focus on volunteers represents one of the most important areas of inquiry in the world. Despite what I said earlier about the dangers of excessive reliance on volunteers to conduct interpretive programs, financial reality dictates that volunteerism in interpretation is here to stay. At least a third of my own training programs are delivered to volunteer groups, especially in the US. It is clear that we must, as a matter of urgency, arrive at a better understanding of the psychological and social needs of this important workforce, and that is what Dr. Wu's research promises to provide.

From my subjective perspective, interpretive research in the past 25 years has evolved as any young area of applied inquiry should evolve. But it is showing signs of maturation. Methodologically, the old focus on univariate and bivariate analyses is beginning to be sprinkled with multivariate designs as researchers dare to account for real-world influences that we know are part of the richness of interpretation but which were usually controlled for in past studies. Research designs are more varied and more sophisticated than they used to be. A very positive sign, I think, is the more frequent use of case studies and qualitative research designs. My only worry is that sometimes the choice of qualitative approaches has more to do with the researchers' fear of quantitative methods than it does the appropriateness of the design for the research question he or she wants to address. Still, the idea that qualitative and quantitative designs can be used in complementary and mutually enriching ways is appealing, and I'm heartened to see that more researchers are testing the waters. Most of the influences that interpretive researchers hope to understand occur in complex real-world settings. Experimental and quasi-experimental

approaches that try to control these factors may bolster internal validity, but controlling for too much can render the phenomenon under study--interpretation--contrived. External validity suffers because the thing we had hoped to understand through the experiment was never, itself, examined. Qualitative designs, while they lack the power of evidence that quantitative designs can produce, provide their own advantages by capturing some of the real-world influences that create the social and psychological context of interpretation. Interpretive researchers must increasingly capitalize on both research approaches. I believe this is beginning to happen.

I started this presentation by promising you one person's perspective on the evolution of interpretive research. It was not intended as a critical analysis so much as an editorial opinion. And that's what I've given you--my subjective read over a twenty five-year span. I think what I've seen has been a natural process of theoretical and methodological development, the quest for legitimacy, and a search for a niche in the applied social sciences. If current trends continue as contemporary interpretive researchers increase the complexity of the issues they examine, research on interpretation stands to make important contributions to sustainable tourism and natural resource management in the coming decades. I am very optimistic about where things go from here. Interpretive research is indeed maturing, and it is maturing all across the world, including here in Taiwan.

Thank you for your kind attention.